

Testimony by Kim McLaughlin
Before the Connecticut Legislature's Judiciary Committee
In Support of Senate Bill 1157
March 26, 2009

Good afternoon. My name is Kim McLaughlin. I am a community organizer, working with public housing residents in state and federal public housing communities throughout Connecticut as a staff person for the Connecticut Public Housing Resident Network and the Connecticut Housing Coalition.

I am here today to urge the members of this committee to support Senate Bill 1157 which will significantly increase funding for Connecticut Legal Services programs in our state. As you know, nearly two-thirds of Connecticut Legal Services' funding had been provided by Interest on Lawyers Trust Accounts (IOLTA) and that pot of money has been severely crippled by the economic recession.

Legal Services provides legal assistance to low income residents in many different issue areas. My experience with the agency lies in the public housing arena.

In 2006, I began working with a small group of low income public housing resident leaders living in the Corbin Heights Pinnacle Heights Extension community in New Britain. Their state public housing community was being redeveloped, with plans for its sale to a private developer. Special Acts had been passed by the Legislature in 2003 and 2004 that provided certain critical resident protections during this process thanks to diligent work by New Britain's Legislative delegation, Senator Don DeFronzo and State Representative Tim O'Brien in particular. Despite the special laws, hundreds of residents living at Corbin Pinnacle did not have the right to legal representation at the decision making table during the redevelopment process. Residents' legal protection from displacement and the right to affordable rents were not guaranteed.

Residents were terrified. Many had lived at Corbin Pinnacle for 30 years or more, were retired from low wage jobs, and had only social security checks for monthly income. They had legitimate questions about the changes that were coming, such as, "Will I have a place to live when redevelopment ends?" and "Will I be able to afford to live here after redevelopment?".

Residents began organizing themselves to fight for their rights. They developed and ratified resident proposals, elected resident negotiators and successfully

insisted on 3 way discussions between their resident organization, CHFA (Connecticut Housing Finance Agency), owner of the property, and Konover Richman, developer of the property. Difficult at first, the discussions began to move ahead as CHFA and Konover Richman came to recognize that residents were not going to accept second class status in the decision-making process to redevelop their community. Recently, the discussions have resulted in a Tri-Party Agreement that will guarantee Corbin Pinnacle residents additional legal rights during the redevelopment of their community.

Sitting beside Corbin Pinnacle resident leaders during every 3 way negotiation session was David Stowe, their resident organization's Legal Services attorney. He was also there for private resident leadership strategy sessions, information sessions for all residents of the community, and one-on-one discussions with individual residents about personal concerns. Residents came to understand that, without their Legal Services attorney, they would have been in a very weak and compromised position in their fight for a seat at the table during redevelopment. They came to understand that without David Stowe, they would have become confused, then hopeless, and finally resigned to losing their homes. With the help of their Legal Services attorney, they developed the confidence they needed to join together to stand their ground and fight for their rights.

The Corbin Heights Pinnacle Heights Extension community in New Britain is one of the first state public housing communities to undergo conversion from public housing to affordable private government financed housing. Over 10,000 low income residents living in state public housing communities throughout Connecticut may be on track for the same experience over the next few years. Without a fully funded Legal Services program, we at the Connecticut Public Housing Resident Network believe that thousands of low income residents may lose important housing rights or be displaced from their communities because they do not have adequate legal advice.

We are a nation that believes in the rule of law. Please guarantee that Connecticut's legal system is one that assures access for all of our residents, including low income residents. Please help Connecticut Legal Services continue at full capacity by supporting passage of Senate Bill 1157.

Thank you.